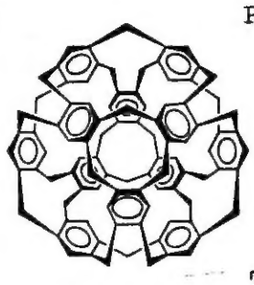
CHEAP TRUTH 2

EDITORIAL: "Dirt Cheap Literary Criticism With the Honesty of Complete Desperation"

PUBLIC SHUDDERS AT "BEST OF THE YEAR"

It can't be the editors' fault. Can it? Terry Carr has as much taste as any editor in the field has ever had. Donald Wollheim may be a tough old shark, a snuff-snorting roue of the ancien regime, but he Knows What People Like.

How to explain, then, the painful dullness of these two collections? (THE 1983 WORLD'S BEST SF, Donald A. Wollheim, ed., DAW, $2.95; THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION OF THE YEAR #12, Terry Carr, ed., Timescape, $3.95.) Is SF suffering from intellectual exhaustion? Perhaps it takes itself too seriously and has lost the careless vigor it had when it was mere pop crap. One might easily conclude this after perusing the vapid "Letter From the Clearys," the pompous and bloodless "Sur," or the Abbess-phone-home fakery of "Souls." But even these clumps of parasitic literary mistletoe have more to recommend them than the clunky obsolescence of James White's "The Scourge" or Timothy Zahn's laughable "Pawn's Gambit."



Consider how good Frederik Pohl's "Farmer On the Dole" looks in this company. This story is predicated on the waggish Pohl-Kornbluth satires of thirty years ago. In those days "Farmer on the Dole" would have ranked as a shoulder-shrugging mild amusement. Nowadays, however, surrounded by stories that lie gasping and wall-eyed with anemia, a story that has enough strength left to execute a rickety buck-and-wing and toss a pie or two deserves acclaim.

Wollheim's collection is burdened by aberrations like the dopier of the two, negligible "The Comedians," Timothy Robert Sullivan's and "Written in Water," one of Tanith Lee's most opaque efforts. The collection closes well with Rudy Rucker's lively Pac-Man parody, but the mind boggles at this choice, since it's probably the worst thing Rucker ever wrote. One winces to think of the impression this must make on Rucker's potential fans, who will almost certainly conclude that his work consists of juvenile ka-chow ka-chow incoherency.

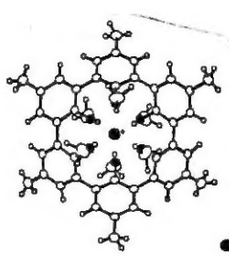
Carr's collection has more on the ball, including Disch's claustrophobically brilliant "Understanding Human Behavior" and Silverberg's competent "Pope of the Chimps." The silly plot of Connie Willis' "Firewatch" does not prevent her from making her point with force and grace. And Gregory Benford's strange parable of modern industrial society, "Relativistic Effects," demands respect and earns it. It is, however, rather dull.

Hope for the future lies with newer writers. Bill Johnson's first story, "Meet Me at Apogee," shows unusual stylistic grace for a hard-SF devotee, and he seems to have grasped the fact that the Future Will Be Different. Bruce McAllister does not know how to plot, but that can be forgiven him, since he is clearly a visionary chomping at the bit. McAllister needs to forget his pretensions and cut loose.

Bruce Sterling contributes a slick piece of entomological SF. The odd popularity of this work, with its intense Stapledonian pessimism, probably shows that readers have missed his point.

But the best comes last: William Gibson's incredible "Burning Chrome." This is the shape for science fiction in the 1980's: fast-moving, sharply extrapolated, technologically literate, and as brilliant and coherent as a laser. Gibson's focussed and powerful attack is our best chance yet to awaken a genre that has been half-asleep since the early 1970's.

And until SF does reform itself, re-think itself, and re-establish itself as a moving cultural force rather than a backwater anachronism, even the cleverest editors will find their efforts useless. They cannot produce meritorious fiction after the fact; nor can they stitch silk purses from the ears of sows, no matter how fat the sows are or how long they have been munching the same acorns under the same tree. SF must stop recycling the same half-baked traditions about the nature of the human future. And its most formally gifted authors must escape their servant's mentality and learn to stop aping their former masters in the literary mainstream. Until that happens, SF will continue sliding through obsolescence toward outright necrophilia.



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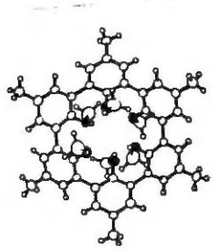

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RAGING DIATRIBE FROM OUR NEW YORK CORRESPONDENT

Our New York correspondent, one of a globe-spanning network of CHEAP TRUTH shills and xerox pirates, sends us these pertinent comments:

"At the Forbidden Planet SF Convention (New York, July 2-3-4), Jack Chalker remarked that before he became well-known, no one reviewed him, whereas now, he's reviewed everywhere -- unfavorably. He claims this is because fan-critics are failed writers, which makes them jealous of Chalker's success. I'm tired of the 'jealous critics' line that hacks like Chalker trot out to justify their awful work and their giant egos. The fact is that, so long as a mediocre writer remains obscure, critics see that there is a certain degree of justice, and they feel no comment needs to be made. But if that writer's trashy, derivative, ungrammatical, garbled prose, and second-hand, second-rate ideas start selling widely, critics feel a justifiable sense of outrage. They vent this outrage in their reviews. Jealousy has nothing to do with it.

"The success of BATTLEFIELD EARTH is easily explained (one million Scientology readers can't be wrong -- or right) but 2010 and FOUNDATION'S EDGE are more baffling. Bearing in mind hardcover prices and the juvenile readership... how many copies of these incredibly dull books were bought by parents as presents for their children? Market research would be illuminating. And how many young readers were disappointed? For that matter, how many people who buy SF novels actually FINISH them? How many mediocre, unoriginal, boring books will a reader tolerate, and still keep buying, in hopes of finding one to stimulate his imagination? At what point do readers become disgusted and give up? Any other industry would have researched such factors long ago. The cost would quickly be recovered in increased efficiency and responsiveness to real market patterns."

"BEST OF THE YEAR" REPRISE -- EUROPE REELS

The morbid state of American SF might lead one to expect -- even to hope -- that the narcotized Amerikaners might be blindsided by an older and wiser literary tradition from the Continent. Judging by this (TERRA SF II -- THE YEARS BEST EUROPEAN SF, Richard D. Nolane, ed., DAW, $2.95), it is not to be. Frankly, there are Soviets who can write better than this.

Three of twelve stories can be exempted from the pillory, especially Francis Carsac's "The Last Atlantean." Its misleadingly maudlin title is the work of the translator, one "Joe F. Randolph." In this collection, Mr. Randolph tackles German, French, Danish, Spanish, and Italian. Can such a polymath exist? Is the wooden prose of this collection perhaps his fault? One might hope so, but the underlying structure of these stories leads one to believe otherwise. They range from flabby Howard pastiches to wet leftist polemics, as dull as Pournelle without even his saving grace of overt violence. And are pickings so slim in Europe that the editor must include one of his own stories?

CHEAP TRUTH TOP TEN

This list, by guest grump Sue Denim, is all recent stuff (within the last year, at least) and should be fairly easy to find.

BEST OF CHARLES BEAUMONT -- Known for his Twilight Zone work, his short fiction is brilliant, literate, and has a vast range of styles and moods. Bantam.

THE TRANSMIGRATION OF TIMOTHY ARCHER by Philip K. Dick -- the Master's last book, a change of pace in tone and style but still brilliant and haunting. Timescape.

THE MAN WHO HAD NO IDEA by Thomas M. Disch -- Bizarre and highly literate collection that fairly shimmers with wit. Bantam.

RIDDLEY WALKER by Russel Hoban -- The made-up language is a pain in the ass, but the extra work is worth it. Grim but deeply moving post-apocalypse. Washington Sq.

THE UNREASONING MASK by Philip Jose Farmer -- Wildly inventive, and if not in a stylistic league with Disch or Hoban, at least Farmer is coherent and readable here (as opposed to, say, the last couple of Riverworld books). Berkley.

COURTSHIP RITE by Donald Kingsbury -- Earth's descendants reduced to near savagery on an alien world -- but wait. This is the real thing, intricately designed and fiercely imagined. Timescape.

THE WAR HOUND AND THE WORLD'S PAIN by Michael Moorcock. His best in years, carefully crafted, full of surprises and convoluted characters. Timescape.

THE SNARKOUT BOYS AND THE AVOCADO OF DEATH by Daniel M. Pinkwater -- You'll have to look in the "Young Adult" section for this one, but do it anyway. Brilliant satire by a genuine mad genius. Signet.

THE GOLDEN SPACE by Pamela Sargent -- Fixup of several stories, with filler material, but it really does work as a novel. Immortals and their genetically altered children raise serious issues. Strong characters. Timescape.

A ROSE FOR ARMAGEDDON by Hilbert Schenck -- This guy is weird and doesn't seem to know how books are supposed to be written, which is a real relief sometimes. Once this one gets rolling (and it does take its time) you won't want to stop. Timescape.